

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

June 7, 2021

**REDWOODS RISING- GREATER PRAIRIE CREEK WATERSHED
FOREST HEALTH AND WILDFIRE RESILIENCY**

Project No. 21-033-01

Project Manager: Lisa Ames

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$1,000,000 to Save the Redwoods League to conduct forest restoration treatments to improve forest health and wildfire resiliency in the Greater Prairie Creek Watershed within Redwood National and State Parks and adoption of findings under the California Environmental Quality Act.

LOCATION: Greater Prairie Creek Watershed, near Orick in Humboldt County

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map](#)

Exhibit 2: [Final IS/EA Negative Declaration](#)

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution and findings.

Resolution:

The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes a grant of an amount not to exceed one million dollars (\$1,000,000) to Save the Redwoods League (“SRL”) to conduct forest restoration treatments to improve forest health and wildfire resiliency in the Greater Prairie Creek Watershed within Redwood National and State Parks in Humboldt County.

1. Prior to commencement of the project, the grantee shall submit for the review and written approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy (Executive Officer) the following:
 - a. A detailed work program, schedule, and budget.
 - b. Evidence that all permits and approvals required to implement the project have been obtained.
 - c. Evidence that the grantee has entered into agreements sufficient to enable the grantee to implement, operate, and maintain the project.

2. If the grantee uses the grant funds to purchase equipment costing \$5,000 or more, the grantee shall use such equipment for wildfire-related purposes for the duration of the useful life of the equipment.

Findings:

Based on the accompanying staff recommendation and attached exhibits, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that:

1. The proposed authorization is consistent with Chapter 3 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding the Climate Ready Program.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines.
3. Save the Redwoods League is a nonprofit organization organized under section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code.
4. The Conservancy has independently reviewed and considered the "Final Initial Study/Negative Declaration and Environmental Assessment for the Greater Prairie Creek Ecosystem Restoration Project" adopted by the California State Parks on July 23, 2019 pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act ("CEQA") and attached to the accompanying staff recommendation as Exhibit 2. The Conservancy finds that there is no substantial evidence based on the record that the project may have a significant effect on the environment, as defined in 14 Cal. Code Regulations Section 15382.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize a \$1,000,000 grant to Save the Redwoods League (SRL) to conduct forest restoration treatments to improve forest health and wildfire resiliency in the Greater Prairie Creek Watershed within Redwood National and State Parks (RNSP) in Humboldt County (Exhibit 1). Through tree thinning, biomass removal and associated road improvements, the proposed project will enable SRL and its partners to reduce fuel loads, accelerate the development of old-growth forest conditions and associated biodiversity, reduce catastrophic fire risk, and increase carbon sequestration benefits.

California has among the most productive temperate forests in the world, which provide numerous ecosystem services, from timber to fresh water to wildlife habitat. Healthy forests play an important role in the hydrologic cycle, promoting infiltration, holding soil on slopes, and maintaining the delivery of high-quality water to streams and downstream uses. Our forests also serve as vital sinks for atmospheric CO₂ (a primary greenhouse gas), in living and dead standing plants, down logs, forest litter, soils, and long-lived durable wood products.

Logging and clearcutting that began in the late 1800s destroyed coastal redwood forests on an industrial scale for many decades. Forest regeneration after clearcutting created unnaturally

dense forests with high competition among trees for light and water, reduced genetic diversity, impaired ability to store carbon or provide ample habitat for native species, and increased catastrophic fire risk. Wildfires in overly dense, structurally homogenous forests with too few large, fire-tolerant trees can result in high-severity burning that is out of the natural range of variability for these forests. High severity fires may lead to long-term changes in forest area, composition, or structure and may lead to large-scale tree regeneration failure as well as having negative impacts on soil productivity, water quality, wildlife habitat, and carbon storage.

The conifer stands in the former commercial timberlands in the project area are generally composed of densely spaced small- and medium-size classes of trees. Vertical fuels have become more continuous, contributing to higher risk of canopy fires. The denser forests have intertwined canopies (high canopy bulk density), allowing fire to spread easily from one tree to the next. The proposed project would, through forest treatments, reduce the potential for high-intensity crown fires that are difficult to control, and reduce exposure of the public to pollutant concentrations from a wildfire or the uncontrolled spread of a wildfire.

Announced in 2018, the Redwoods Rising Project is a landscape-scale approach to forest restoration across multiple watersheds through a collaborative and integrative program designed to accelerate the development of late seral stage forest conditions in previously logged forests and enhance salmonid habitat. Redwoods Rising is a formal partnership among SRL, National Park Service and California State Parks to restore up to 80,000 acres of redwood ecosystems in RNSP over the coming decades. In 2019, the Conservancy provided SRL a grant to undertake forest restoration in the Mill Creek Watershed, the northern portion of the Redwoods Rising initiative. The proposed project would address forest lands in the Prairie Creek watershed, the southern portion of the initiative.

As a component of Redwoods Rising, the Prairie Creek project will specifically conduct thinning treatments and associated road improvements throughout the Greater Prairie Creek watershed to reduce fire hazard by reducing stand density, redistributing growth among the remaining trees, and enhancing forest health. The project will include up to 431 acres of lop and scatter and up to 27 acres of biomass removal (both thinning treatments), up to 0.5 acres of road improvements, and environmental compliance work. Compliance activities include conducting rare plant, bird, and carnivore surveys and preparing pre- and post-implementation reports and organizing site visits with regulators such as California Department of Fish and Wildlife, North Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Site Description: The project area is in the Greater Prairie Creek watershed within RNSP (Exhibit 1). Vegetation includes coniferous forest dominated by coastal redwood (*Sequoia sempervirens*), Sitka spruce (*Picea sitchensis*), and Douglas-fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*). Some regions of old-growth coastal redwood forest remain in the southern portion of the watershed in the StreeLOW Headwaters-Davison-Skunk Cabbage planning region and in the May Creek planning region in the northeastern portion of the watershed. However, most of the watershed is currently densely vegetated with regenerated stands of spruce, grand-fir (*Abies concolor*), Douglas-fir, coast redwood, and red alder (*Alnus rubra*). The overstory in these second-growth stands is typically dominated by spruce, redwood, or Douglas-fir with redwood sprouting from old-growth stumps. Grand-fir (*Abies grandis*) and western hemlock (*Tsuga heterophylla*) trees

are present in the overstory. The thinning project will occur within this large matrix of second-growth, degraded forests.

Lop and scatter work will be conducted in the Prairie Creek North Unit (Exhibit 1). The Prairie Creek North unit is located south of the Ossagon trail, north of the James Irvine trail and west of Newton B. Drury Scenic Parkway. The unit is completely surrounded by old-growth redwood forest, which makes the old-growth more susceptible to edge effects. Biomass removal will take place in Unit 1, and road improvements are on the GBEC 100 Road within Unit 1. Unit 1 is located east of Espa lagoon and located within the Espa creek drainage. The area is north of Davison Road and south of the Miners Ridge Trail.

Grant Applicant Qualifications: Since 1918, Save the Redwoods League has been dedicated to the long-term preservation of a healthy redwood ecosystem through redwood restoration and stewardship and the support of scientific research to expand knowledge of the forest's ecosystem. Over the past 101 years, SRL has protected more than 200,000 acres of land (worth more than \$4 billion in today's dollars) and helped create 66 parks and reserves. SRL has the fiscal capacity and expertise to conduct the proposed project.

The Conservancy and SRL have collaborated on numerous north coast projects over the last 20 years including acquisition of the 25,000-acre Mill Creek property in Del Norte County and acquisitions at Humboldt Lagoons State Park, Montgomery Woods State Park in the upper Big River watershed, and the Usal-Shady Dell Creek area in Mendocino County. With Conservancy funding, SRL completed a segment of the coastal trail on the Shady Dell property. Recently, the Conservancy helped fund the Greater Mill Creek Watershed Restoration project in Del Norte County as part of the Redwoods Rising initiative.

PROJECT FINANCING

| | |
|----------------------------|--------------------|
| Coastal Conservancy | \$1,000,000 |
| Project Total | \$1,000,000 |

The anticipated source of funding is a Fiscal Year 2020-21 special appropriation from the General Fund to the Conservancy. This appropriation was part of a package of funding for the purpose of urgent wildfire risk reduction. The proposed project is consistent with the anticipated funding source.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

Staff has independently evaluated the "Final Initial Study/Negative Declaration and Environmental Assessment for the Greater Prairie Creek Ecosystem Restoration Project" adopted by the California State Parks on July 23, 2019 and concurs that there is no substantial evidence that the proposed project will have a significant effect on the

environment. Less than significant impacts would be temporary in duration. The proposed action is anticipated to result in long term benefits to aesthetics, biological resources, greenhouse gas emissions, hydrology and water quality, and reduced wildfire risk in the project area. Staff therefore recommends that the Conservancy find that there is no substantial evidence that there is no substantial evidence that the project will have a significant effect on the environment as that term is defined by 14 Cal. Code Regs. §15382.

Upon approval of the project, Conservancy staff will file a Notice of Determination.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The recommended project would be undertaken pursuant to Section 31113 of Chapter 3 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, which authorizes the Conservancy to address the impacts and potential impacts of climate change on resources within the Conservancy's jurisdiction (Section 31113(a)).

Pursuant to Section 31113(b), the Conservancy is authorized to award grants to nonprofit organizations and public agencies to undertake projects that include reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and addressing extreme weather events, sea level rise, flooding, and other coastal hazards that threaten coastal communities, infrastructure, and natural resources.

Pursuant to Section 31113(c), the Conservancy must prioritize grants for projects that maximize public benefits and have one of several purposes, including reducing emissions of greenhouse gases.

Consistent with these sections, the proposed project maximizes public benefits and is a priority because it facilitates the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions from increased wildfires due to climate change. Besides reducing greenhouse gas emissions, the public benefits include improvement of forest health and protection of life, property, public health, water quality, and natural resources.

The proposed project addresses resources within the Conservancy's jurisdiction by improving forest health and reducing the risks of wildfire that would adversely impact water quality and habitat in a coastal watershed (Chapter 5.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code).

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S [2018-2022 STRATEGIC PLAN](#) GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):

Consistent with **Goal 8, Objective C** of the Conservancy's 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will implement projects to increase resilience to climate change impacts using nature-based solutions and other multi-benefit strategies.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines, last updated on October 2, 2014, in the following respects:

Required Criteria

1. **Promotion of the Conservancy’s statutory programs and purposes:** See the “Consistency with Conservancy’s Enabling Legislation” section above.
2. **Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** See the “Project Financing” section above.
3. **Promotion and implementation of state plans and policies:**

The proposed project will help implement:

 - [California’s Wildfire and Forest Resilience Action Plan](#) (Governor’s Forest Management Task Force, January 2021), which calls for activities such as fuels reduction, forest thinning, vegetation management, prescribed fire, shaded fuel breaks, defensible space, and enhancement of fire-prone habitats to reduce fire risk.
 - The [California Forest Carbon Plan](#) (CNRA, 2018), which calls for restoration of natural fire regime and forest composition through a multitude of approaches including thinning, prescribed burns, invasive vegetation management, and shaded fuel breaks.
 - The [Community Wildfire Prevention & Mitigation Report](#) (Cal Fire, 2019), which urges state and local agencies to implement the goals of the Carbon Forest Plan and lays out recommendations to agencies to increase the scale and pace of management and mitigation actions to improve forest health and resiliency.
 - The [Forests and Rangelands Companion Plan, California State Wildlife Action Plan Update](#) (CDFW 2015), which encourages projects that seek to create a healthier and more resilient forest ecosystem.
 - The [Environmental Goals and Policy Report “A Strategy for California @ 50 Million, Supporting California’s Climate Change Goals”](#) (OPR, 2015), Goal 6 of the Steward and Protect Natural and Working Landscapes section, which calls on the State to “Build resilience into natural systems and prioritize natural and green infrastructure solutions”.
4. **Support of the public:** There is enormous public support for wildfire risk reduction. A statewide poll conducted last fall found that 74% of surveyed voters believe that wildfire threat is greater now than in the past.
5. **Location:** The proposed project is located in Humboldt County, within the Coastal Conservancy’s jurisdiction pursuant to Chapter 5.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code.
6. **Need:** California is facing unprecedented fire risk due to climate change, decades of fire suppression, and a growing populace. The extent of fire risk reduction projects that are needed to address the risk, including in advance of the upcoming fire season, cannot occur without public funding.

7. **Greater-than-local interest:** Minimizing wildfire risk is of statewide significance.
8. **Sea level rise vulnerability:** The subject land is situated well above current and projected Year 2100 sea levels.

Additional Criteria

9. **Urgency:** The 2020 fire season broke numerous records. The proposed project is urgently needed to reduce fire risk in advance of the upcoming fire season.
10. **Resolution of more than one issue:** This project addresses three major issues: it seeks to reduce wildfire risk, improve forest health, and will be focused on areas where homes and communities are most at risk, the wildland-urban interface.
11. **Readiness:** The project is ready to begin work immediately.
12. **Vulnerability from climate change impacts other than sea level rise:** The project will address fire resiliency in the context of anticipated climate change. Fire resilience is a critical issue exacerbated by the effects of climate change, including increased average temperatures, reduced marine fog, and longer and more severe droughts.
13. **Minimization of greenhouse gas emissions:** This work seeks to mitigate GHG emissions from catastrophic wildfires by lessening the fire risk, improving forest resiliency to fire and improving carbon sequestration.